

St. John Fisher College

## Fisher Digital Publications

---

Education Doctoral

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

---

8-2013

### Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies

Marguerita Geralyn Circello  
*St. John Fisher College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education\\_etd](https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd)



Part of the Education Commons

### [How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Circello, Marguerita Geralyn, "Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies" (2013). *Education Doctoral*. Paper 142.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at [https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education\\_etd/142](https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/142) and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

# Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies

## Abstract

The purpose of the study is to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. The study addressed research questions concerning the reasons why middle school adolescents turn to social media sites to bully their peers. Cyberbullying is increasing due to the overwhelming use of the Internet by adolescents. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) reports that 89% of boys and 95% of girls have sent or received email, 56% of girls, and 55% of boys have visited chat rooms while three fourths of teenagers reported spending 30 to 60 minutes texting their friends. The researcher conducted a phenomenological qualitative study on middle school adolescents using interviews. The research questions (RQ) used in the individual interviews tested the disinhibition, dissociative anonymity, and social dominance theories revealing characteristics in adolescent bullies of deindividuation and desensitization in the evolution of cyberbullies. Data analysis and findings suggested that participants felt empowered or "in control" using social media sites to bully as very apparent in the primary themes that emerged from each participant's responses. In RQ1, five primary themes emerged from participants' interview responses: (a) negatively affect, (b) easier than face-to-face, (c) social acceptance, (d) power, (e) building self-esteem, and (f) think of others. Three primary themes emerged in RQ2 from participants' responses: (a) matter-of-fact, (b) easier than face-to-face, and (c) in control. Three primary themes emerged in RQ3 from participants' interview responses: (a) destroy their character, (b) notoriety, and (c) building up own self-esteem. vi

## Document Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

## Department

Executive Leadership

## First Supervisor

Richard Maurer

## Second Supervisor

Frances G. Wills

## Subject Categories

Education

Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies

By

Marguerita Geralyn Circello

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Richard Maurer

Committee Member

Dr. Frances G. Wills

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2013

## **Dedication**

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the desire to take the first step. Although frightening, you are compelled by a curiosity to test your stamina or shall we say; “The stuff that only great things are made of.” As I began this journey, I knew I was not alone. I carried all the hopes, dreams, and best wishes, of my family, our ancestry, and close friends. It is to all of you that I dedicate this work and am honored and humbled to have in my corner.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to my chair, Dr. Richard Maurer. Dr. Maurer, you entered the path of my journey at a time I had lost all belief in myself. Your belief in me and my potential to be successful in completing the journey were the driving force in rekindling my love of my topic and the process itself. Your compassion, strength, and guidance have brought my dream of completion to fruition. Thank you so, so, much. To my committee member, Dr. Frances Wills, I am grateful for your wealth of resources of scholarly researchers that you hold in your repertoire. Your guidance and support were truly appreciated.

The journey cannot begin until you take that first big step. The step was easier to take because of the PUSH received from my Executive Mentor, the future Dr. Murdisia Orr. My dream of success could not have been possible if she had not paved the way with her example of strength, and perseverance. Thank you for all your sage advice and pulling me off the ledge when I wanted to jump too soon, or quit altogether. You are the true antithesis of Executive Leadership.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my parents, Maria & Donato for being the embodiment of determination, and a desire to move forward in life despite all odds. Without your constant support always behind me as a child, I would have never taken any steps at all. You both have been the driving force for my success. I proudly stand on the shoulders of great people in our family who worked hard to make this country what it is today. You taught me to aim high and to make this world a better place for all those who come in my midst. To my sister, Lisa, and my nephews, Matthew and Andrew, I thank you for putting up with my absence at family meals and special functions in your lives. In addition, I thank you for putting up with me when I frequently fussed, “Who touched my stuff!” which referred to the mounds of books, journals, and papers that consumed every possible space in my home office.

I would also like to thank our Program Director, Dr. C. Michael Robinson for his support, encouragement, and leadership. To all my professors and members of the SJFC/CNR Cohort 3 family, I shall never forget the impact you all have had on my journey up Mt. Fisher and all the successes, trials, and affirmations we have made during our time together.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Marguerita Geralyn Circello is a Doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College at the College of New Rochelle. She is currently an Instructional Classroom Leader. Her dedication and commitment to her students continues to be an inspiring testimony to her 22 years of leadership, service, and passion in the field of Education.

She received a Bachelor of Arts in Communications/Spanish and Teaching Certification in 1996, and a Master's of Science in Instructional Technology in 2005 from Pace University. She completed a two year fast track Advanced Certificate Program in School Leadership and received her licensures in School District Leader and School Builder Leader from SUNY Stony Brook in 2010.

In May of 2011, she entered the St. John Fisher College Ed.D program in Executive Leadership at the College of New Rochelle. During her tenure as a Doctoral Candidate in the Ed.D program, Marguerita has collected data, conducted research on her topic and worked collaboratively with instructors and cohort team members in analyzing data, understanding policies, procedures on strategic planning, and ethical best practices. The culmination of her process ended with a phenomenological qualitative study on the Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. The study addressed research questions concerning the reasons why middle school adolescents turn to social media sites to bully their peers.

Cyberbullying is increasing due to the overwhelming use of the Internet by adolescents. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) reports that 89% of boys and 95% of girls have sent or received email, 56% of girls, and 55% of boys have visited chat rooms while three fourths of teenagers reported spending 30 to 60 minutes texting their friends.

The researcher conducted a phenomenological qualitative study on middle school adolescents using interviews. The research questions (RQ) used in the individual interviews tested the disinhibition, dissociative anonymity, and social dominance theories revealing characteristics in adolescent bullies of deindividuation and desensitization in the evolution of cyberbullies.

Data analysis and findings suggested that participants felt empowered or “in control” using social media sites to bully as very apparent in the primary themes that emerged from each participant’s responses. In RQ1, five primary themes emerged from participants’ interview responses: (a) negatively affect, (b) easier than face-to-face, (c) social acceptance, (d) power, (e) building self-esteem, and (f) think of others. Three primary themes emerged in RQ2 from participants’ responses: (a) matter-of-fact, (b)

easier than face-to-face, and (c) in control. Three primary themes emerged in RQ3 from participants' interview responses: (a) destroy their character, (b) notoriety, and (c) building up own self-esteem.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Biographical Sketch .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vii
List of Tables .....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
Theoretical Rationale .....	3
Research Questions .....	5
Potential Significance .....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Definitions of Terms .....	7
Chapter Summary .....	8
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .....	9
Introduction and Purpose .....	9
Review of the Literature .....	9
Chapter Summary .....	16
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology .....	17
Introduction .....	17

Research Context .....	18
Research Participants .....	19
Instruments to be used in Data Collection .....	21
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis .....	21
Chapter 4: Results .....	24
Research Questions .....	24
Data Analysis and Findings .....	25
Summary of Results .....	42
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	44
Introduction .....	44
Implications of Findings .....	45
Limitations .....	48
Recommendations .....	48
Conclusion .....	50
References .....	55
Appendix A .....	59
Appendix B .....	62
Appendix C .....	63
Appendix D .....	64
Appendix E .....	67
Appendix F .....	68
Appendix G .....	70
Appendix H .....	72

### **List of Tables**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Table 4.1	Summary of Demographics of Study Participants	25
Table 4.2	Summary of Differences Between Exploratory and Confirmatory Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis	28
Table 4.3	Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for RQ1	30
Table 4.4	Frequency of Themes and Subtheme for RQ2	37
Table 4.5	Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for RQ3	41

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

This study described the influences of the misuse of social media and the evolution of adolescent cyberbullies. As online use increased, so did the debates about how Internet based interaction may compare with historical face-to-face ways of communicating. One argument posed by Williams and Merten (2008) was that the Internet is a lower quality form of communication than face-to-face interaction because constraints in the online medium world hinder the formation of peer-to-peer relationships.

The use of online communication may be linked to adjustment problems because socially immature adolescents are attracted to social media networks. An alternative argument posed the supposition that the Internet has become a new medium for adolescents to display the same long-standing patterns of social media behavior as they do using other forms of communication as correspondence between face-to-face and online interaction styles and friendship quality (Tyler, 2002). Communication via the Internet has taken the place of letter writing, visiting friends to just “hang out” and talk, and telephoning. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) reported that 89% of boys and 95% of girls have sent or received email, 56% of girls, and 55% of boys have visited chat rooms while three fourths of teenagers reported spending 30 to 60 minutes texting their friends. The use of online communication negatively correlated with social behavior adjustment problems, because socially competent adolescents treat the online

environment as it was intended to be used: another place to interact with existing friends and broaden their social circle (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Tyler, 2002).

Characterizations of adolescents' social relationships on the Internet and investigation of continuity between face-to-face and online social behaviors lent themselves to identification as key components in redefining theories on adolescent social development. It is during the adolescent period that peer interactions arguably hold the greatest importance for individuals' social and behavioral functioning (Berscheid, 2003; Collins, 1997; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). The quantity of peer interactions and the intimacy in friendships rose dramatically (Berndt, 1999; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). The correlation between the quality of friendships based on face-to-face interaction and that derived from social media sites peaked during adolescence (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Bargh and McKenna (2004) argued that adolescents' friendships were sustained or fell apart as the popularity of social media sites increase.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a lack of research on why students use social media to bully other students. The damage caused by words of a peer can stay with a person for a lifetime (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Using the Internet, cyberbullies can transmit their harmful words and deeds any time, and any place they have access to a media device. As Hinduja and Patchin (2007), noted bullying has changed. It no longer happened in the schoolyard. It now follows adolescents home, or any place they have access to media devices as their cell phones, gaming devices, iPads, laptops, and home computers. In Appendix A, the researcher presented two vignettes as examples of the misuse of social media sites by adolescents (M. G. Circello, researcher reflective notes, February 2012).

As cited in the research social networking has become a very serious problem among 21<sup>st</sup> century adolescents. Facebook, AOL instant Messaging (AIM), texting, sexting, and cyber bullying are the communicational devices America's adolescents have chosen to communicate with each other. In an article written by Williams and Merten (2008), traditional forums of conversation and genuine social interactions take place behind computer monitors and cellphones. These digital channels provided little opportunity for any vocal communication, reading of body language, and gesturing, other than symbols used called emoticons. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some scholars believed adolescents had lost the art of conversation and that the loss had rendered them unfeeling to one another and society (Williams & Merten, 2008).

### **Theoretical Rationale**

This study was conducted to help the reader understand the problem of cyberbullying from the perspective of the cyberbully and why the cyberbullies used social media sites in a negative manner. According to Aftab (2009), cyberbullying was perceived as just another type of bullying. However, the research stated cyberbullying is unique in its ability to hurt and destroy a person's character and self-esteem. Cyberbullying has been identified as the cause for most adolescent suicides (Aftab, 2009).

This study was guided by three theories: Olweus' Social Dominance Hierarchal Theory (1993), Suler's Dissociative Anonymity Theory (2004), and Hinduja and Patchin's Disinhibition and Deindividuation Theory (2009).

**Social Dominance Hierarchal Theory.** Olweus' (1993) theory of Social Dominance Hierarchy provided explanations of how the social networking sites influence

bullying behaviors. The dominance theory posited by Olweus (1993) stated that high sociometric status empowers adolescents to continue their denigrating behavior because it elevates their self-actualization and self worth far above that of their peers.

**Dissociative Anonymity Theory.** Suler's (2004) Anonymity Theory stated that as adolescents navigate among social media networking sites as Facebook, Twitter, and chat rooms, others they encounter can't easily determine if they are who they say they are. Usernames, email addresses are visible and assumed to be the person they claim to be. However, adolescents, according to Suler (2004) share their log in names, email addresses, and even passwords giving so-called friends access to their websites, Facebook pages, AOL instant messaging accounts, and chat rooms.

In addition, as this theory states, anyone can use a person's online identity supporting the creation of fake identities. Some even expect participants to take on fantasy identities. Suler (2004) continued by stating that the typical information available on a social networking site may not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is contrived and the email address is shared, or tied to a fake identity. As stated in his research, people can hide some or all of their identity. They can alter their identities by not using their own names as the word anonymous indicates (Suler 2004). Suler (2004) theorized that anonymity is the leading factor that creates an online disinhibition effect among adolescents. He stated that when adolescents are able to hide behind a pseudonym and act differently than they would in their real lives, they feel empowered and less vulnerable about acting out. This feeling of invisibility gives them the courage to go online and cyberbully their classmates and friends. Avoiding eye

contact and face-to-face visibility with one's peers disinhibits adolescents from realizing how traumatic their actions are to another person (Suler, 2004).

**Disinhibition and Deindividuation Theory.** As researchers linked cyberbullying behaviors with theories of human behavior, there is no single theory or factor to explain why cyberbullying occurs (McQuade et al., 2009). Hinduja and Patchin (2007) suggested that one theoretical model that will answer the question is disinhibited behavioral affects on the Internet. Joinson (1998) argued that adolescents on the Internet behave in a way they would not normally behave in real life because of the effects of disinhibition or the feeling of losing all of one's inhibition thus making people act more boldly when communicating via email or texting. According to Joinson (1998), disinhibition effects are caused by deindividuation. Deindividuation can occur when accountability cues are reduced meaning that anonymity can reduce concerns about others' reactions and anonymity caused bullies to disassociate their feelings for the person since they are not speaking directly to the person (Joinson, 1998).

### **Research Questions**

1. Why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully?
2. How do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully?
3. What are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully?

### **Potential Significance**

The significance of the study was its intent to contribute to the field of research seeking to determine why students increasingly used social media to bully other students. This behavior can be modified when students accept responsibility for holding each other accountable to a higher standard of communicating with one another other than the

medias they use on the Internet. McDonnell (2009) argued that one of the most overwhelming negative feelings a young person can have is that of being on the outside, not being accepted, loved or respected by others. Such factors had a major effect on the way a young person views school, learning, and life. As this researcher noted, such implications became increasingly evident with adolescent exposure to social media networks.

Williams and Merten (2008) asserted that in all schools across our nation students bully and exclude each other from activities on a daily basis. The negative effects of these actions were that targeted kids felt unhappy, which caused them to engage in violent behavior, drop out of school, or join gangs to feel accepted and respected. They continued by indicating that, adolescents used blogs to communicate via web, text that otherwise occurred in face-to face interaction and explored the Internet for sexual promiscuity. Williams and Merten (2008) further proposed that if continued, these negative behaviors inevitably caused adolescents to become social deviants, known as cyberbullies due in part to their engagement in vicious, domineering behavior unacceptable to their families, their peers, and academic life.

Although bullying has existed around for many years, adults and teachers dismissed it as a stage of adolescent social development that every child has to go through, similar to a “rite of passage.” Olweus (1980) posited that a large number of adolescents worldwide were the targets of bullying or were the bully. Juvonen and Gross (2008), for example, reported on the prevalence of cyberbullying using various samples and instruments found that 70% of adolescents experienced cyberbullying.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. This study sought to answer the research questions concerning the reasons why middle school adolescents turn to social media sites to bully their peers.

## **Definitions of Terms**

**Bullying:** an aggressive, intentional negative act or behavior that is inflicted by a group or an individual repeatedly over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself/herself. Negative acts include verbal, physical, and intentional social exclusion (Olweus, 1993).

**Cyberbullicide:** the phenomena of killing yourself as a direct result of social media torture (Suler, 2004).

**Cyberbullying:** using social media network sites or other digital technologies such as cellular phones and personal pagers to be mean or harass others (Agatston, 2007).

**Cyberstalking:** repeated threats and or harassment by the use of electronic mail or other computer-based communication, making a reasonable person afraid or concerned for his or her safety (Finn, 2004).

**Deindividuation:** the determination or contraction of a general nature to an individual mode of existence; development of the individual from the general (Suler, 2004).

**Desensitization:** becoming emotionally insensitive or callous. Extinguishing an emotional response (as of fear, anxiety, or guilt) to stimuli that formerly induced it becoming numb to the pain and suffering of others (Merriam-Webster, 2012)

**Disinhibition:** normal behavior restraint that can become lost or disregarded.

Researchers have shown that people tend to act more boldly when communicating via email or texting (Joinson, 1998).

### **Chapter Summary**

Cyberbullying has become a pervasive type of bullying that exists today. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2009) cyberbullying is relentless in its attack on teens. The level of awareness of how easy it is to become a cyberbully is apparent to all stakeholders (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

This study was conducted to help the reader understand the problem of cyberbullying from the perspective of the cyberbully and why the cyberbullies use social media sites in a negative manner. As the research of the literature unraveled the evolution of the cyberbully, a conscious effort was being made to educate cyberbullies with regard to the harm they caused victimized teens who resorted to committing cyberbullicide. The chapters that follow provide the baseline observations that allowed the researcher to make appropriate recommendations to further the field of research on this topic. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature of previous studies done on Cyberbullying. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology used to conduct interviews with research participants. Chapter 4 reveals the findings of the data collected for each research question. Recommendations for further research in the field are discussed in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

As current as today, there has only been a handful of studies conducted focusing specifically on cyberbullying among adolescents. Those studies that have been researched used different methods to gather their information about; (a) how adolescents cyberbully one another, (b) the frequency with which teens were cyberbullied or cyberbullied someone, and (c) the affects of cyberbullying on both the victim and the perpetrator (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2008).

Cyberbullying takes on many forms. According to Willard (2007), it can happen through deliberate acts such as sending threatening or aggressive emails, texts, and/or instant messages. Cyberbullies spread malicious rumors, post embarrassing pictures/videos on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, AOL et al. with the intent to damage their victim's peer relationships, as well as damage their reputation. Cyberbullies can attack at any time and their attacks are long lasting on their victims, as there is no escape from the cyberbully. As these authors note, in cyberbullying the hurtful and humiliating content is sent to a large number of people quickly (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

### **Review of the Literature**

As an emerging topic among researchers, limitations have arisen in finding studies and major theorists to support the stated hypothesis that America's adolescents have become desensitized because of the obsessive use of social media networking sites

(SNS) to cyberbully one another. Although cyberbullying is an emerging topic and newly researched as recently as 2005, studies suggest that cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent among youth worldwide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, Li, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Due to the scarcity of literature and conceptual clarity, the definition of cyberbullying will vary among researchers and in order to understand cyberbullying, literature on bullying will be reviewed and presented.

Cyberbullies use 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to reach their victims. This species of bullying uses social media networking sites as a vehicle to support its cause. It is deliberate and repetitive in its attack on its victim. It is hostile and inescapable because a cyberbully is not someone who attacks his or her victims in the schoolyard and then goes home. Cyberbullies attack their victims during school using cell phones, pagers, gaming devices, school computer labs, and human messengers. Nevertheless, it does not stop at the end of the school day. It is there at home waiting for the victim on their home computer, and continues on their cell phone. Cyberbullied teens have no reprieve from their attackers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007).

In the Cyberbullying Victimization Survey, Appendix B, the data speaks to a study conducted by Drs. Hinduja and Patchin. Their sample size consisted of 4,441 students taking an electronic survey. Their findings were as follows; approximately 20% of the students in their sample reported instances where they were cyberbullied within their lifetimes. When asked about specific types of cyberbullying in a 30 day span of time, the students reported mean or hurtful comments (13.7%) and rumors spread (12.9%) online continue to be among the most commonly-cited in the study. Seventeen percent of the sample reported being cyberbullied in one or more of the nine types

reported, two or more times over the course of a month (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2010).

In the Cyberbullying Offender Survey, Appendix C, the data speaks to the finding that approximately 20% of the students in their sample admitted to cyberbullying others. The participants reported posting mean or hurtful comments and spreading rumors online were the most common types of cyberbullying. About 11% of the sample reported cyberbullying using one or more of the nine types reported, two or more times a month (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2010).

Bullying, as defined by Olweus' (1993) definition is an aggressive, intentional negative act or behavior that is inflicted by a group or an individual repeatedly over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself/herself. Negative acts include verbal, physical, and intentional social exclusion.

As cyberbullying is a relatively new topic, the definition varies depending on the researcher. Agatston et al. (2007) defines cyberbullying as using the Internet or other digital technologies to be mean or harass others. Hinduja and Patchin (2007) define cyberbullying as intentional and persistent harm inflicted through electronic text. Finn (2004) describes cyberstalking as repeated threats and or harassment through the use electronic mail that would make a person concerned for their safety.

According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), cyberbullying and traditional bullying are alike in many ways. They both have a bully, a victim, and third parties involved. Secondly, in both cases, their intent is to inflict harm on someone else. There is an imbalance of power among the victim and the bully or cyberbully. As the researchers

state, the act of a bully or a cyberbully is not a one-time event. It is repeated over time, with the victim unable to defend himself/herself from the attack.

Although cyberbullying and traditional bullying are alike, their differences make cyberbullying an increasingly dangerous phenomenon. Unlike traditional bullying, a cyberbully maintains anonymity from his/her victim on social network sites. A cyberbully can take on a form of dissociative anonymity by taking on a pseudonym, or acting on behalf of someone else. The true identity of the cyberbully may never be known by the victim unless third party bystanders report them (Suler, 2004).

According to Li (2008), another obvious difference between the two is that bullying is intended to harm the individual at school, in the playground, or at the park. Cyberbullying is an activity that sends out messages to a larger audience, intending to harm an individual at a faster speed than waiting until after school to attack their victim. Cyberbullies have the capability to remain completely anonymous to their victims. Their victims remain unaware of their aggressor's identity. A cyberbully's identity remains hidden through the use of pseudonyms, or screen names. It is anonymity that empowers a cyberbully with such maliciousness toward their unsuspecting victim. According to these researchers, the cyberbully is not completely anonymous and can be identified by the cyber footprint they are leaving behind. However, most victims of cyberbullies are reluctant to come forward with any information so that the bully can be identified and stopped (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

**Profiles of cyberbullies.** According to Aftab (2009) and Ringrose (2006), traditional bullies fit one type of mold. They note that usually the bullies are bigger, and

stronger than their victims. They are prone to verbally attacking their victims. Aftab (2009) contends that Cyberbullies come in four types:

1. *The vengeful angels* who believe they are protecting themselves or someone else. They do not believe they are cyberbullies.

2. *The social dominant hierarchal bully* who was often bullied himself or herself. They are the ones that use their technology skills to gain power and act tough over the Internet. They are called the power hungry cyberbully because they want to show they have power over others to make them do what they want.

3. *The mean girl* is a form of cyberbullying done in a group. The mean girl concept is often perceived as a type of cyberbullying done as a form of entertainment with no regard for the feelings of the victim. The cyberbully can start out as a friend of the victim and due to an argument becomes a source of torture for the victim. Studies have shown that the mean girl phenomenon has become the preferred form of 21<sup>st</sup> century bullying among girls.

4. *The inadvertent cyberbully* is the bully who responds to others online without thinking, usually in anger or frustration. This type of cyberbully is the one who bullies others because they can. They are totally disinhibited from their actions through the use of the Internet.

**Mannerisms of cyberbullies.** Cyberbullies use a variety of methods to torture their victims. According to research done by Willard (2006), the following are the most popular forms of cyberbullying:

- Flaming arguments between the two

- Offensive messages posted, texted, tweeted, or emailed repeatedly to harass the victim
- Verbal denigration designed to break up friendships
- Impersonation, or the intentional act of pretending to be someone else and posts material that causes harm to the victim
- Outing and tricking. This form of cyberbullying is “publicly posting, sending, or forwarding personal communications or images, especially communications or images that contain intimate personal information or are potentially embarrassing” (Willard, 2007, p. 9). It can also be a situation where the target is “tricked into thinking that a communication or sent message is private, and reveals something embarrassing about them that is then posted online by the cyberbully
- Shunning: exclusion of victim from a group
- Cyberstalking or Internet-based stalking behavior

Kowalski and Limber (2006) created a youth Internet survey. They randomly selected 700 participants to take their survey regarding issues of cyberbullying and victimization. The data showed that 11% reported being cyberbullied at some point in their lives. Only 3% admitted to cyberbullying someone else. As they surveyed middle school adolescents ranging in age 12–14, instant messaging was used to victimize, with 42% of respondents stating they were cyberbullied in this manner. Their study further concluded that cyberbullies preferred instant messaging by 33% as their weapon of choice.

Using a revised version of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996/2004), Kowalski and Limber, 2006, researched 3,767 students in 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades. They used an anonymous pencil and paper questionnaire asking them about their experiences with traditional bullying and cyberbullying. The questionnaire posed questions such as: “How often have you been electronically bullied in the past couple of months?” (Agatston et al., 2008, p. 1036). Eighteen percent of the students reported they were electronically bullied at least once within a two-month period and six percent responded that they were bullied at least two to three times a month.

As researchers linked cyberbullying behaviors with theories of human behavior, there is no single theory or factor to explain why cyberbullying occurs (McQuade et al., 2009). Hinduja and Patchin (2007) suggest that one theoretical model that will answer the question is disinhibited behavioral effects on the Internet. Joinson (1998) argues that adolescents on the Internet behave in a way they would not normally behave in real life because of the effects of disinhibition.

According to Hinduja and Patchin (2007), disinhibited behavior suggests a disregard to social conventions exhibited by adolescents. Their surveys have shown that adolescents will continue to cyberbully their peers because social media sites provide them the forum to do so with little to no social consequence. Joinson (1998) continued his arguments that adolescents on the Internet behave in a way they would not normally behave in real life because of the effects of disinhibition. Ten years later, Mason (2008) confirms Joinson’s point by stating; “Disinhibition means that normal behavior restraint can become lost or disregarded” (p. 328). Supporting these arguments, many researchers, including Hinduja and Patchin (2009), Aftab (2009), McQuade et al. (2009), and Suler

(2004), have shown that people tend to act more boldly when communicating via email or texting. Disinhibition effects are caused by deindividuation, which can occur when accountability cues are reduced; in other words, anonymity can reduce concerns about others' reactions (Joinson, 1998).

### **Chapter Summary**

As the review of the literature has shown thus far, research is needed to continue to uncover the underlying reasons why adolescents use social media to inflict harm on each other. As researchers, such as Hinduja and Patchin (2007), Agatston (2008), Kowalski and Limber (2007), and Suler et al., (2004) delved deeply into cyberspace to unravel the reasons why there currently has been an outbreak of cyberbullicides among adolescents. Hinduja and Patchin, 2007, contend as advancements continue to be made in the field of technology, the power of cyberbullies continues to grow. Aftab (2009) research maintains that cyberbullies come in four types: (a) the vengeful angels, (b) the social dominant hierarchal bully, (c) the mean girl, and (d) the inadvertent cyberbully.

Although cyberbullying and traditional bullying are alike, their differences make cyberbullying an increasingly dangerous phenomenon. Unlike traditional bullying, a cyberbully maintains anonymity from his/her victim on social network sites. It is hostile and inescapable because a cyberbully is not someone who attacks his or her victims in the schoolyard and then goes home. According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), Cyberbullies attack their victims during school using cell phones, pagers, gaming devices, school computer labs, and human messengers and their victims cannot escape them once they are home. Cyberbullying follows its victims home, to the schoolyard, and back home again.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The damage caused by the words of a peer can stay with a person for a lifetime (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Using the Internet, cyberbullies can transmit their harmful words and deeds any time, and any place they have access to a media device. As Hinduja and Patchin (2007) noted, bullying has changed. It no longer happens only in the schoolyard. It now follows adolescents home, or any place they have access to media devices as their cell phones, gaming devices, iPads, laptops, and home computers.

The purpose of the study was to bring to light the causes of adolescent cyberbullying. The question needing an answer is: Are we supposing that cyberbullies are naturally prone to bully their peers or do we think that this new phenomenon of intimidation has evolved due to the influences of an adolescent's cyberspace environment? The researcher proposed to conduct a phenomenological qualitative study on middle school adolescents using interviews. The interview questions used tested the disinhibition, dissociative anonymity, and social dominance theories hoping to reveal characteristics in adolescent bullies mimicking those of deindividuation and desensitization in the evolution of cyberbullies.

There were only a handful of studies conducted which focused specifically on cyberbullying among adolescents. Those studies used different methods to gather their information about; a) how adolescents cyberbully one another, b) the frequency with

which teens were cyberbullied or cyberbullied someone, and c) the effects of cyberbullying on both the victim and the perpetrator (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2008).

**Qualitative research approach (QualRA).** Cottrell and McKenzie (2005) state that the purpose for conducting a QualRA is to describe, explain, and understand the complex nature of a phenomenon. The focus of a QualRA is to provide valuable information and insight into a topic. Denzin and Lincoln, (2000) contend that a qualitative approach is on processes and meanings that are unable to be measured in terms of quantity or frequency. Denzin and Lincoln, (2005) state that, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p.3). Willis (2007) adds that observational research a) puts the researcher in the context that is of interest, b) requires the researcher to collect data or participate with others in data collection, and c) involves the researcher in the analysis and interpretation of those data.

### **Research Context**

The context of this study is a medium sized school district on the East Coast, in the Lower Hudson Valley Region of Westchester County, New York, comprised of two middle schools, three high schools, and several elementary schools. The researcher conducted her study in a middle school located within this school district in the Lower Hudson Valley Region of Westchester County, New York. The student population is divided among the seventh and eighth grade. According to the New York State Accountability & Overview Report from 2010-2011, the total number of students within the middle school is 792. Fifty-nine percent are eligible for free

lunch, 10% qualified for reduced lunch, and 9% of the student population was labeled limited English proficient (New York State Education Department, 2012). The entire process of data collection, coding, and analysis took approximately two months.

The racial/ethnic origin distributions of the student population was 0% American Indian or Alaska Native, 74% Black or African American, 17 % Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian or native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 7% White (New York State Education Department, 2012). The Accountability & Overview Report also identified that 11% of the student population were previously suspended for intimidation and bullying (New York State Education Department, 2012).

### **Research Participants**

In an attempt to regulate the incidences of cyberbullying among school districts, the federal government signed into law The Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) on July 1, 2012. The original legislation amended State Education Law by creating a new Article 2 – Dignity for All Students. The DASA also amended Section 801-a of New York State Education Law regarding instruction in civility, citizenship, and character education. This was done by expanding the concepts of tolerance, respect for others and dignity to include: an awareness and sensitivity in the relations of people, including but not limited to, different races, weights, national origins, ethnic groups, religions, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientations, gender identity, and sexes. This act requires stricter record keeping of bullying/cyberbullying incidents (Dignity for All Students Act, 2012).

The researcher conducted the study in this particular middle school due to the number of egregious incidents of harassment, intimidation, and cyberbullying recorded on their Violent and Disruptive Incident Reports (VADIR). Fifteen respondents to the study were selected from both the seventh and eighth grades. Participation in this study was voluntary on the part of the students. They were asked to be participants in a shared governing, decision-making process that will be used to create behavior modification plans for self-identified bullies/cyberbullies.

The researcher deliberately avoided bringing a bias to the study by eliciting the assistance of independent school personnel to select the 15 participants and ranked them in order by the number of bullying/cyberbullying incidences reported. To narrow the field of adolescents needed for the qualitative interview process, five students were selected as a focus group and participated in an initial set of group interviews to test the validity of the interview questions. The participants ranged in ages from 12 to 15. Based on data from school incident reports on file, 10 participants were asked to participate in individual interviews.

These interviews were conducted in a location agreeable to the participants within the school. Students interviewed received \$25 gift cards for participating in this research study. Interviews took place after school or during the students' lunch period.

Every precaution was made to ensure students' rights were taken into account and that their participation would not carry any punitive ramifications for them. The results and all findings from the research are kept in a secure, undisclosed location for 3 years.

As the researcher is a Dignity Act Coordinator of a school, an independent consultant conducted the interviews and gathered the data from all participants to prevent

any bias on the researcher's part. A cross analysis was conducted of data from the focus group, interviewees, and data from theorists used in the study for triangulation. This study attempted to validate the researcher's assumptions that adolescents were disinhibited in their acts of bullying their victims. In cyberspace, adolescents feel that they are virtually free to express themselves without anyone knowing who they are (Agatston, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Suler, 2004; and Willard, 2006).

### **Instruments used in Data Collection**

The researcher used the following instruments to collect data. The interviews were recorded using the application (app) HT Recorder Version 6.0 for the iPad 4<sup>th</sup> Generation. This app stores voice recordings in an HT Recorder folder. The information on the folder was downloaded onto a laptop computer and transcribed. Once downloaded, the media file was copied to a digital storage device. The researcher coded the data from the interviews and data collected from notes taken during interviews using Microsoft Office Excel. The researcher looked for themes and trends in the data to align findings to the problem statement discussed in this study. The voice recorded interviews were deleted from the computer's hard drive to maintain confidentiality of participants.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Five participants acted as a focus group and tested the validity of the interview questions. They acted as a panel of experts in the field of cyberbullying their peers because of the number of incidences of bullying alleged against them. Participants were told their involvement in this study was voluntary. They were told that they would answer questions about cyberbullying and their reactions to using social media sites to bully their peers. The researcher's independent consultant was used to conduct the

interview of the focus group. Although their answers could not be used as a part of the data findings, it was interesting to read in the interviewer's notes that the focus group participants were enthusiastic about being a part of the process. They offered several valid suggestions to be used when interviewing the ten adolescents who had agreed to be individually interviewed. When explained that pseudonyms were going to be used to protect the identity of all participants, they chose names such as: (a) Anime, (b) Avatar, (c) Pikachu, and (d) Sims. These names are representative of identities a person can assume when entering a digital simulated world, playing a digital game, or setting an icon to their own Facebook page or instant messaging application (app). At the closing point of the group interview sessions, three students offered alternative questions that they felt could be used in getting the other participants to be more open in sharing their experiences as alleged cyberbullies.

When the researcher was briefed on the experiences shared during the group interviews, it was very telling that the group participants were open and almost bragging about their experiences to the interviewer and other members of the focus group. The interviewer's notes stated, "The focus group participants felt comfortable and not threatened in the least by partaking in the study. They also mentioned how relaxed and at ease they felt talking about their experiences in a group setting."

This approach to research is considered ethnographic as it involves fieldwork or interviews to uncover truths about proposed theories (Willis, 2007). Ten respondents were asked to participate in individual interview sessions conducted by an independent consultant. The researcher used the phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of ten participants in order to try to uncover the misuse of social media to

cyberbully their peers (Maxwell, 2005). The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. A critical friend transcribed the interviews to ensure accuracy of researcher's transcription verifying triangulation of the data in preparation for coding. Charts were created from the data and using a thematic analysis of the transcriptions. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

The researcher used Microsoft Office Excel 2010 and notes taken on chart paper to assist in classifying, sorting, and coding. Excel allowed the researcher to take the data transcribed using MS Word and converted it to an excel spreadsheet. The researcher used line-by-line analysis to familiarize herself with each participant's responses. Each response was transferred into its own cell provided there was a carriage return used after each response. The researcher preferred using Excel software because it enabled her to systemically analyze complex phenomena hidden in contextual discourse such as the participants' interviews and multimedia data. It kept track of all notes, annotations, codes, and memos. It also allowed the researcher to test theories, identify trends, and cross-examine information as well as accommodate a wide range of research methods such as grounded theory, conversation analysis, phenomenology, and action research.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Research Questions

This chapter states the results of the research findings of this study, which stem from the following research questions:

1. Why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully?
2. How do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully?
3. What are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully?

The purpose of the study was to bring to light the causes of adolescent cyberbullying. The researcher conducted a phenomenological qualitative study on middle school adolescents using interviews. The interview questions used tested the disinhibition, dissociative anonymity, and social dominance theories hoping to reveal characteristics in adolescent bullies mimicking those of deindividuation and desensitization in the evolution of cyberbullies.

**Demographics of participants.** The researcher conducted her study in a middle school in the Lower Hudson Region of Westchester County with some egregious incidents of harassment, intimidation, and cyberbullying recorded on their school's VADIR reports. As noted in Table 4.1, based on the pool of incident reports selected by the independent school personnel a diverse group of students emerged as participants for this study. Some of the students qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. Respondents to the study were also from both the seventh and eighth grades. They range in age from 12 to 15. The researcher ranked all respondents in order by the

number of bullying/cyberbullying incidences reported. She selected those respondents who have the most incidences alleged against them to partake in the individual interviews. The researcher took every precaution to ensure confidentiality of participants' identities. The researcher offered pseudonyms created by the focus group panel of five adolescent cyberbullies for each participant to choose from to maintain anonymity.

Table 4.1

*Summary of Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity	F/R Lunch
Anime 1	14	Female	8	African American	No
Anime 2	15	Female	8	Hispanic	Free
Anime 3	13	Female	7	Hispanic	Free
Avatar 1	14	Female	8	Jamaican	No
Avatar 2	13	Male	8	Caucasian	Reduced
Pikachu 1	12	Male	7	Caucasian	Free
Pikachu 2	13	Male	7	Hispanic	No
Pikachu 3	15	Male	8	Hispanic	No
Sims 1	15	Female	8	Jamaican	Free
Sims 2	14	Female	8	African American	Free

**Data Analysis and Findings**

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used to examine the causes of the misuse of social media sites in the evolution of adolescent cyberbullies through lived experiences and perceptions of seventh and eighth grade students from a medium

sized school district in the Lower Hudson Valley Region of Westchester County. Based on school records, participants were selected as being those students with the most incidences of bullying/cyberbullying alleged against them. Transcripts of student interviews were analyzed to assess the three research questions of this study. The research questions (RQ) that guided this study were:

RQ1: Why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully?

RQ2: How do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully?

RQ3: What are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully?

The research questions (RQ) were answered by identifying themes from ten interviews through qualitative analysis. Each interview was considered as a single incident. Common themes were identified from the interviews and field notes taken by the interviewer. The process of data analysis involved “making sense out of the text and data...and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). The researcher searched for patterns, and reoccurring themes in the data through analysis of the interviews, field notes, coding of the data, and further analysis as new themes and patterns emerged. The goal was to describe cyberbullying through the participants’ subjective lived experiences and views.

**Coding.** A line-by-line analysis of the interviews and tapes was done and written on chart paper. Common words and phrases that were used several times from varying participants were ticked with a different color marker. The researcher used Microsoft Excel to chart frequencies of similar responses made. Coding the data identified seven

primary themes. Several of the primary themes were classified into subthemes. The findings were summarized by RQ and quote from the interviews were used to illustrate the themes and subthemes. A cross analysis was done with the themes highlighted in the transcriptions vs. those identified prior to transcription.

**Thematic analysis.** Qualitative research can be compared in many ways to martial arts. Approaches to qualitative data collection and analysis are many. Qualitative research represents a diverse range of epistemological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives. Most researchers remain steadfast to the one style with which they are familiar and comfortable. Good data analysis and research design combines elements and techniques from across all three traditional perspectives. The theoretical foundation provides a framework for inquiry, but it is the data collection, data analysis, and the outcomes of those processes that are crucial in conducting the study. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a type of qualitative data analysis that involves multiple analytic techniques. The design and plan for a particular analysis depends a lot on the approach taken and the type of outcome expected by the researcher. Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, (2012) in Table 4.2, provide a summary of the differences between two approaches of confirmatory and exploratory qualitative research thematic approaches.

Table 4.2

*Summary of Differences Between Exploratory and Confirmatory Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis*

Exploratory (“content-driven”)	Confirmatory (“hypothesis-driven”)
“What do x people think about y?”	“x people think z about y”
Codes derived from the data.	Codes derived from hypotheses.
Data usually generated.	Typically uses existing data
Uses purposive sampling	Employs random sampling

*Note.* The main difference between the two approaches is that for an exploratory study, the researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas in the data that will help outline the analysis, before the analysis takes place (Guest et al., 2012, p. 7).

The researcher found that using the exploratory approach to thematic analysis to code data provided for a more straightforward methodology when presenting the data using tables and figures. Using the exploratory approach to thematic analysis also allowed the researcher to capture the participants’ lived experiences more clearly. The researcher chose not to use the confirmatory approach to thematic analysis because the results would not be as authentic as it uses existing data rather than newly generated data to formulate the results. (Guest et al. 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There are six phases of thematic analysis. The first three are: (a) familiarize yourself with the data, (b) generate interesting observations in a systemic fashion organizing data relevant to each code, and (c) searching data for potential themes. The last three are: (d) reviewing themes in order to create thematic map of analysis, (e) define

and refine the specifics of each theme to the overall story, and (f) producing the final analysis by selecting rich examples that relate back to the RQ (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Grounded theory.** The emphasis on supporting claims with data is what links applied thematic analysis to grounded theory. Grounded theory is a set of inductive and iterative techniques designed to identify categories and concepts within text that are then linked into formal theoretical models (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss 1967). Charmaz (2006) describes grounded theory as a set of methods that “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). Grounded theory is a process that according to Bernard and Ryan (1998) is deceptively simple: (a) read verbatim transcripts, (b) identify possible themes, (c) compare and contrast themes, identifying structure among them, and (d) build theoretical models, constantly checking them against the data. Thematic analysis involves steps one through four (Guest et al., 2012).

The researcher used the grounded theory approach to data analysis as it offered the opportunity to create a depth of knowledge and understanding for the interviews. A line-by-line interpretation of each participant’s statements enriched their personal narratives described in this study’s findings.

**Findings for RQ1.** Research question one asked the participant, why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully. Six primary themes emerged from students’ interview responses: (a) negatively affect, (b) easier than face-to-face, (c) social acceptance, (d) power, (e) building self-esteem, and (f) don’t think of others. What was telling in the initial phase of transcribing the data was the ease with which the participants spoke of the reasons why adolescents use social media to cyberbully. The

answers were repetitive by most interviewees. The frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews and across the data is reflected in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

*Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1*

Themes and subthemes	N mentioning	Total implications or mentions
Negatively affect to victims	10	28
Hurt someone	10	27
Easier than face-to-face	10	24
No repercussion	10	14
Social acceptance	10	22
Fit in	10	17
Get popular	10	12
Power	10	24
Building self-esteem	10	13
Don't think of others	10	22

*Note.* Primary themes were created by the researcher to categorize answers given by participants in order to facilitate coding. Words indented are subthemes assigned to that primary theme based on frequency of use by participants.

**Theme #1: negatively affect.** The most reoccurring theme for RQ1 was to negatively affect the victim. It was implied as “negatively affecting the victim” 28 times in all 10 interviews. The participants’ quotes were further classified into one subtheme. Avatar 1 shared the following,

Sometimes, when I go on my FB page, I see stuff my friends say about their teachers n' other girls at school specially if they are fat, ugly, act smart, and just for no reason but to get a lot of likes. Like there's some bullies that will record a female doing sexual activity with them or take pictures and put on Facebook and then everybody starts to comment about it and the person is feeling very embarrassed for the activity.

Anime 2 added that social media is used for cyberbullying because it makes it easy to do it:

Many people use it in a bad way, an embarrassing way, and just to get at a person. They get on your page or get on your screen name because a so-called friend gives it to them or they look at your information on your phone and go online and say stuff about you. Social media devices make it easy to say anything you want especially when they get on your nerves.

Pikachu 3 comments about why adolescents use social media sites to bully are

Adolescents use social media sites to bully their peers because they want to make you feel bad. Social media sites let you go to a person's page and if other people are saying shit about the person, you can just like the comment or add your own.

It's a lot of fun to be a part of a group of people that bash somebody's rep. Like if you had a bad reputation, cyberbullies just want to make it worse or make other people believe you're a piece of crap.

**Primary Subtheme: hurt someone.** The subtheme for this primary theme was hurt someone. This subtheme referred to the times participants said social media devices were used to hurt others. All interviewees mentioned it 27 times. Sims 1 offered, "It

hurts more, and it's funnier." Anime 1 said, "Well, it's used to hurt other people's feelings." Sims 2 echoed others sentiments by saying, "Because you just want to hurt'em."

**Theme #2: easier than face-to-face.** The second theme was easier than face-to-face. It correlated to participants' mention that adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully because it is easier than confronting someone in person. This primary theme was implied 24 times in ten interviews. Exemplar quotes uncovered one subtheme: no repercussion. Pikachu 2 stated that social media is used to cyberbully "cause it's easier that walking up to them." Avatar 2 expressed that the Internet makes it easier for bullies who may not want to bully someone face-to face by saying, "In my generation, we use the Internet to bully a person or post pictures of them because they don't see us. Instead of going after them, we'd rather use the Internet. Pikachu 1 added, "You can't tell who it is, because you're behind the computer."

**Primary subtheme: no repercussion.** This subtheme referred to the mention that adolescents use social media to cyberbully because there does not seem to be any repercussions.

Pikachu 1 said,

You can say whatever you want and nobody can't do nothing to you because you're not in their face. They can't tell it's you because you just use a fake name or change your avatar image and that's it. You're hidden...you're undercover like a bad secret. It's hard for anyone to trace it back to ya so you just wanna keep doing it 'cause nothin' happens to you. You neva get caught.

Sim1 shared,

You can get away with it, because no one can see your face , so they can't put us on the spot instantly. All you do is delete the account and it will never be there, so you get off with a clean slate.

Pikachu 3 added,

I am not like them. I'm different because I don't want to be like them. But they pick on me 'cause I'm new and different. I can pick on them and hurt them and they will neva know it's me. If I really don't know how to defend myself physically, I can defend myself verbally online and not get beat 'cause they don't know it's me.

**Theme #3: social acceptance.** The third theme uncovered by this study was social acceptance. It referenced the times interviewees mentioned that adolescents used social media devices to cyberbully for social acceptance. The two subthemes that were revealed were; to fit in, and get popular.

**Primary subtheme: fit in.** This primary subtheme refers to the statements made by participants' that adolescents use social media devices as a way to fit in. This subtheme was alluded to 17 times by all interviewed. Sims 2 suggested students cyberbully "just to try and fit in with other people." Avatar 2 said, "Well, I feel that sometimes it starts when you've been bullied in school or if you don't fit in."

**Secondary subtheme: get popular.** The second most frequently occurring subtheme was get popular. It referred to declarations made by students that the use of social media to cyberbully allows you to get popular. All interviewees stated it 12 times during individual interviews. Anime 1 said, "Sometimes it's done to get popular."

Pikachu 1 commented by saying,

You get a lot of followers, you get more friends and that means more likes. That is how people see it. You want to be known. You want a name. Everybody talks about it in school. You hear them say things about what you posted and it's never bad things. It's all good things about how much they laughed when they read the stuff about what you said about someone. When you go to the caf' you see them showing other kids the post and they're all talkin' about it.

**Theme #4: power.** The theme of power occurred several times during the interviews. It referred to revelations that adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully because of the sense of power they feel. All interviewees inferred this primary theme 24 times.

Anime 3 shared,

When you're behind your computer, you feel like you have power, you can say whatever you want and nobody can't do nothing to you because they don't know it's you.

Avatar 2 added,

You get like a rise out of it. Like you feel powerful because if they can't defend themselves physically, you can do it online with your words. You feel like you got control over something you don't have in real life but you got it on the Internet.

**Theme #5: building self-esteem.** The fifth frequently occurring theme was build self-esteem. It alluded to statements that adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully as a way to build their own self-esteem. All interviewees mentioned it 13 times.

Avatar 2 contended,

If you're not popular, then you're gonna try a way to fit in by hurting somebody to make you feel like you belong. That's what a lot do.

Sims 2 echoed by saying,

You look to gain on your self-esteem. Rather than build it up the right way, you'd rather bully somebody else to make you feel good and you bring back your self-esteem. You know it's like when you get a high grade on a test and nobody else did or when you're wearing a new outfit and you looked cute and everyone wants to look like you but can't.

**Theme #6: don't think of others.** The sixth and final theme that was uncovered in the coding of data was don't think of others. It referenced the mentions made by interviewees that adolescents who use social media devices to cyberbully do not think of others while cyberbullying their victims. All interviewees implied this theme 22 times.

Pikachu 3 shared,

You feel like you didn't do nothing wrong because you're not thinking about it or anyone. They don't matter. It's not like you care what happens because it really is no big deal.

Avatar 1 added,

You don't think about their feelings. It's not about them it's about how doing it makes you feel important and in control. You're like a powerful person wit your friends. It's good because you don't know it hurts them. You just do it to do it.

**Findings for RQ2.** Research question two asked the participant how do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully? When asked this question seven out of the ten interviewed answered based on their lived experiences. There were three outliers

to this question. Sims1, Sims2, and Avatar 1 chose to give their responses in the third person. As written in the interviewers notes,

Each one became withdrawn for a moment before answering as if appearing to reflect on their answer or choice of answers. Each one was asked if they felt uncomfortable and wished to stop the process. They answered that they were fine and were eager to continue but would not speak of their experiences for this question.

At the end of each one of their interviews, the interviewer noted that, Each one said they would have answered research question two if it was emailed, texted, or inboxed to one of their media devices.

The researcher excluded their answers from data analysis and coding as she felt they were not authentic to the interview process. However, the researcher will elaborate more on these three outliers and the significance their situation played in this study.

The frequency with which the themes appeared across interviews and across the data is reflected in Table 4.4. What was interesting to note in coding the data reflected in this table was two themes from RQ1 had resurfaced in a number of participants' answers, i.e. no repercussion, and power.

Table 4.4

*Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2*

Themes and subthemes	N mentioning	Total mentions
Matter-of-fact	7	24
Showing off	7	18
Bragging	7	18
Without remorse	7	22
No repercussion	7	14
In control	7	17
Power or Powerful	7	14
Untouchable	7	12

*Note.* Primary themes were created by the researcher to categorize answers given by participants in order to facilitate coding. Words indented are subthemes assigned to that primary theme based on frequency of use by participants.

**Theme #1: matter-of-fact.** The primary theme for RQ2 was matter-of fact. It was reflective of the statements participants made regarding the ways cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies. Seven out of ten interviewees referenced this theme 24 times.

Avatar 2 declared,

What’s the big deal. You make a fake account, friend request them, when they accept you as a friend you just go on their page and make comments about them.

Anime 3 added,

One time, this girl got one my nerves cause she was acting cute in class and I just had to shut her down. So I said stuff about her online usin’ a different name.

**Primary subtheme: bragging.** A primary subtheme that emerged from was bragging. It referenced the mention made by interviewees about how cyberbullies

describe their experiences as bullies. Seven out of ten interview interviewees referenced this subtheme 18 times. An exemplar quote by Pikachu 3 was,

Oh! There was this one time when I was hanging with my friends and we were talking about other guys in our class...I told them how I asked to see this dude's phone and got his Facebook name and went online and posted shit about him being gay. Man [laughing], he was pissed.

***Secondary subtheme: showing off.*** A secondary subtheme mentioned by participants' about how cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies was showing off. Seven out of ten participants referenced this subtheme 18 times. Anime 1 stated,

Once, my friends wanted to get back at this girl in school by taking some of her pics from her instagram and I was the only one who could show them. I'd done it before. So I showed them how to photo shop some of the pics to make her look ugly, weird, stupid, and fat.”

**Theme #2: without remorse.** A second primary theme that occurred in the data analysis for RQ2 was without remorse. It was reflective of the way cyberbullies described their experiences as bullies. All seven interviewees alluded to it 22 times. The researcher inferred the theme when Anime 2 said,

Why is everyone making issues about it? It doesn't matter if you hurt their feelings because you're not doing it to their face...So then they learn they gotta get over it.

***Primary subtheme: no repercussion.*** A recurrent subtheme emerged from RQ1, which was no repercussion. It was reflective of how cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies. All seven interviewees alluded to it 14 times.

Avatar 2 stated,

...and they tried to find out it was me but they couldn't. Even if they try it can't stick because all you do is claim somebody stole your username and nothing happens.

Anime 3 shared,

Nothing happens to you anyway. You cover up your tracks with a fake, back up account and they'll neva know who did it.

**Theme #3: in control.** The final theme for RQ2 is control. It revealed how cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies. All seven participants made reference to it 17 times during interview process. It was apparent when Pikachu 2 stated,

You are able to make the other person feel anyway you want them to because of what you say about'em online. You can make'em feel really scared... it's whatever you want.

Avatar 2 added,

You feel like you got control over something you don't have in real life but you got it on the Internet. You know you messed wit their head because of what they may write on their wall or text you back if you use IM to bully 'em.

**Primary subtheme: power or powerful.** A recurrent subtheme emerged from RQ1, which was power or powerful. It revealed how cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies. All seven participants referenced it 14 times during interview process.

Avatar 2 alluded to this theme when he said,

You get like a rise out of it. Like you feel powerful because if they can't defend themselves physically, you can do it online with your words.

***Secondary subtheme: untouchable.*** A secondary subtheme that emerged was untouchable. It reflected how cyberbullies describe their experiences as bullies. All seven participants made mention of this theme 12 times while being interviewed. As Anime 3 shared previously,

Nothing happens to you anyway. You cover up your tracks with a fake, back up account and they'll never know who did it.

Anime 1 added,

It's not like anybody does anything about it. They never tell on you cause they're scared so you can just keep doing it and never get in trouble.

Pikachu 1 revealed,

After the first time making fun of somebody and not get caught, you move on passed it and keep going because if you don't get caught you can't feel bad about it so you keep doing it.

**Findings for RQ3.** Research question three asked the participants, what are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully? According to the post interview conference with the interviewer, Avatar 1, Sims 1 & 2 felt comfortable and eager to answer this question. She prefaced this by saying,

According to my notes, the three participants responded with enthusiasm to tell what their expected outcomes were for using social media to bully.

Three primary themes emerged from the participants' interviews. They were (a) destroying their character, (b) notoriety, and (c) build up own self-esteem. As reflected

in Table 4.5, the primary theme build up own self-esteem was previously mentioned in RQ1.

Table 4.5

*Frequency of Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 3*

Themes and subthemes	N mentioning	Total mentions
Destroy their character	10	34
Notoriety	10	28
Build own self-esteem	10	25

**Theme #1: destroy their character.** The primary theme that had the most number of mentions was destroy their character. It reflected the interviewees responses to what are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully. When the data was analyzed the researcher noted that most interviewees responded immediately, in incomplete sentences or words like, “Bring’em down.”, “put’em in their place.” and so on. Sims 1 added, “...because it’s so easy to do you don’t know you’re hurting someone because it’s not about them. They’re the problem and you just don’t care.” Avatar 2 said, “...’cause texting and stuff makes it easier to break somebody cause words do hurt as bad as hitting them.”

**Theme #2: notoriety.** The second primary theme was notoriety. It referred to the feelings interviewees felt the expected outcomes of using social media to bully. All ten interviewees alluded to this theme 28 times during their answers. Pikachu 2 exclaimed, “Yo, using social media to bully can make you Facebook Famous.” Avatar 1 expressed,

You get a lot of followers when you thug somebody on social media sites especially Facebook. You can see the likes your post gets so then you know how popular you're getting.

**Theme #3: building up own self-esteem.** The final theme that emerged was building up own self-esteem. It referred to the way interviewees felt from the expected outcomes from using social media to bully. All ten interviewees made mention to this theme 25 times when responding to RQ3. Sims 2 expressed a feeling of notoriety by saying, "You feel like you're in control. Like, everybody starts to follow you and you feel important." Anime 1 added, "You're a part of a group because you're actin' like the cool kids...because you're a part of them other kids look at you too and you know people got your back."

### **Summary of Results**

The purpose of the study was to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. This study answered the research questions concerning the reasons why middle school adolescents turn to social media sites to bully their peers. Qualitative analysis was used to draw conclusions from the interviews. The three theories that guided the research were dissociative anonymity, disinhibition and deindividuation, and social dominance hierarchy. Each theory played a part in formulating the research questions: RQ1, why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully; RQ2, how do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully; and RQ3, what are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully?

Ten participants participated in individual interviews. Their responses provided the framework for the researcher's assumptions that the influence of the misuse of social

media devices helps adolescents evolve into cyberbullies. Data analysis and findings suggested that participants felt empowered or “in control” using social media sites to bully. These findings support Olweus’ theory of social dominance hierarchy. They felt they were untouchable because there were no repercussions for their actions because frequently they were unidentifiable proving the theory of dissociative anonymity. Lastly, they were unremorseful after using social media devices to bully peers because they stated it did not matter if they hurt somebody as long as they felt part of the group, which was in line with Hinduja, and Patchin’s theory of Deindividuation and Disinhibition.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The final chapter of this study is designed to further discuss the results detailed in Chapter 4 and provide recommendations to the field for practical applications and further study. Implications of the findings, limitations and recommendations will be presented based on themes and trends found in the data analysis coded from the statements made by participants interviewed.

As online use has increased, so have the debates about how Internet-based interaction may compare with historical face-to-face ways of communicating. Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) reported that 89% of boys and 95% of girls have sent or received email, 56% of girls, and 55% of boys have visited chat rooms while three fourths of teenagers reported spending 30 to 60 minutes texting their friends. Evolution of technology has changed the nature of bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). It no longer only happens in the schoolyard. It now follows adolescents home, or to any location where they have access to media devices, such as their cell phones, gaming devices, iPads, laptops, and home or school computers.

As the review of the literature has shown thus far, research is needed to continue to uncover the underlying reasons why adolescents use social media to inflict harm on each other. As researchers, such as Hinduja and Patchin, 2007; Agatston, 2008; Kowalski, 2007; Limber, 2007; and Suler et al., 2004, delved deeply into cyberspace to unravel the ether, they note that currently there has been an outbreak of cyberbullicides

among adolescents. As cited in the research social networking has become a very serious problem among 21<sup>st</sup> century adolescents. Using multiple communication devices: Facebook, AOL Instant Messaging (AIM), texting, and now Twitter, Instagram, and other software applications, many adolescents engage in inappropriate texting, sexting, and often cyberbullying to interact with their peers.

Unfortunately, there has only been a handful of studies conducted focusing specifically on cyberbullying among adolescents. Those studies that have been conducted primarily used quantitative methods to gather their information about; (a) how adolescents cyberbully one another, (b) the frequency with which teens were cyberbullied or cyberbullied someone, and (c) the effects of cyberbullying on both the victim and the perpetrator (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to utilize a qualitative methodology to develop a deeper understanding of the adolescent thought process and reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. In an attempt to uncover this phenomenon, the researcher has sought to fill a gap in the literature. This was accomplished by examining the transcripts of in-depth interviews of adolescents and demonstrating that adolescents use social media sites to bully their peers because (a) they can remain anonymous to victims, (b) they feel a sense of power and control over their victim, and (c) they lose a sense of self by trying to fit in with other bullies.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have implications for how we understand the reasons why adolescents use social media sites to bully and therefore, how we may intervene to provide suitable and meaningful instruction to students to counter their behavior. A

thematic qualitative analysis was used to draw conclusions from the interviews. Ten adolescents agreed to be participants in this study. Their responses to the research questions were aligned to the three theories guiding this study.

**Implications for Olweus' social dominance hierarchy.** This theory speaks to the need adolescents have for being superior to their peers. It is this inflated sense of ego that prompts an adolescent's propensity to bully/cyberbully their peers. Olweus, (1993) posits that adolescents use the Internet in an aggressive manner against weaker students to gain a higher social status among their peers. The themes and subthemes that aligned to his theory are (a) power, (b) notoriety, (c) building up own self-esteem, (d) social acceptance, (e) fit in, and (f) get popular. These themes were found in RQ1 & RQ3. The dominance theory also states that a high sociometric status empowers adolescents to continue their denigrating behavior because it elevates their self-actualization and self worth far above that of their peers.

**Implications for dissociative anonymity theory.** Suler's (2004) Anonymity Theory states that as adolescents navigate among social media networking sites as Facebook, Twitter, and chat rooms, others they encounter can't easily determine if they are who they say they are. They can alter their identities by not using their own names as the word anonymous indicates (Suler 2004). He also theorized that anonymity is the leading factor that creates an online disinhibition effect among adolescents. The themes and subthemes that aligned to Suler's theory of anonymity are (a) easier than face-to-face, (b) don't think of others, and (c) untouchable. These themes align the theory with RQ1 and RQ2.

When adolescents are able to hide behind a pseudonym and act differently than they would in their real lives, they feel empowered and less vulnerable about acting out. This feeling of invisibility gives them the courage to go online and cyberbully their classmates and friends (Suler, 2004).

**Implications for Hinduja and Patchin's disinhibition and deindividuation theory.** As researchers linked cyberbullying behaviors with theories of human behavior, there is no single theory or factor to explain why cyberbullying occurs (McQuade et al., 2009). Hinduja and Patchin (2007) suggested that one theoretical model that will answer the question is disinhibited behavioral affects on the Internet. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2007), disinhibited behavior suggests a disregard to social conventions exhibited by adolescents. Their surveys have shown that adolescents will continue to cyberbully their peers because social media sites provide them the forum to do so with little to no social consequence.

The themes and subthemes that aligned to their theory are (a) easier than face-to-face, (b) matter-of-fact, (c) showing off, (d) no big deal, (e) no repercussion, and (f) without remorse. These themes support findings and align Hinduja and Patchin's theory to RQ1 and RQ2. Deindividuation occurs when accountability cues are reduced. Online anonymity reduces concerns in bullies/cyberbullies about others' reactions causing bullies/cyberbullies to disassociate their feelings for the person since they are not speaking directly to the person.

Another implication of the findings to this study resides in the third person or outliers to the study. This occurred when Avatar 1, Sims 1, and Sims 2 answered RQ2 in the third person rather than describing their own experiences as bullies. Their answers

were not coded for related themes and trends, as they were not speaking of their own lived experiences as bullies.

What is telling about their statements as told by the interviewer proves that behind a computer adolescents are disinhibited from speaking their minds. The interviewer noted, "Each one said they would have answered research question two if it was emailed, texted, or inboxed to one of their media devices."

### **Limitations**

A limitation to the study was that it was conducted at only one middle school located in a high poverty, urban setting in the Lower Hudson Valley Region in Westchester, New York. A second limitation was the small sample size used in conducting the focus group and interviews.

### **Recommendations**

The significance of this study is to contribute to the field of research that examines why students increasingly use social media to bully their peers. This behavior can be modified when students accept responsibility for holding each other accountable to a higher standard of communicating with one another other than the media they use on the Internet.

Traditional forums of conversation and genuine social interactions do not take place behind computer monitors and cellphones. These digital channels provide little opportunity for any vocal communication, reading of body language, and gesturing, other than symbols used called emoticons. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some scholars believe adolescents have lost the art of conversation and that the loss has rendered them unfeeling to one another and society (Williams & Merten, 2008).

Specifically, there are several recommendations that are considered as a natural extension to this study, and hold the potential to further advance findings in this area. Conducting a study such as this in multiple school districts, with different types of socioeconomic status, in other varying geographic areas across the country, could provide additional valuable insight into participant's experiences with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has left cyberspace and has made its way back to the schoolyard. The qualitative observations yielded the following conclusions: (a) a need for high quality implementation of the Dignity for all Students Act exists in all schools, (b) strong leadership is essential in getting all stakeholders to buy into its implementation, and (c) staff, students, and community members must work together to sustain the change this piece of legislator brings forth.

On September 13, 2010, Congress signed the Dignity for all Students Act (DASA) into law. This Act requires school districts to implement into the instructional curriculums of civility, citizenship, and character education awareness and sensitivity to discrimination or harassment. Each District must set guidelines for its schools to implement school employee professional development plans. The law became effective July 1, 2012. This act also requires stricter record keeping of bullying/cyberbullying incidents.

As noted in the findings of Chapter 4 of this study, consequences must be enforced to dispel the theories of disinhibition and anonymity. Adolescents who bully/cyberbully their peers need to be held accountable for their actions if we are going to reduce the amount of fights that have made their way into the schools as a result of cyberbullying or cyberbullied victims fighting back.

As adolescents have become disinhibited by the misuse of social media to bully their peers, character education classes need to be embedded in school curriculums as well as opportunities for conflict resolution among bullies and their victims. Further research needs to uncover ways that school policy makers engage in meaningful conversation making a conscious effort to improve and implement codes of conduct that bring awareness to saving both the victims and the bullies.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to help the reader understand the problem of cyberbullying from the perspective of the cyberbully, as well as understand why cyberbullies used social media sites in a negative manner. The results of this study reflect national trends regarding the rise of cyberbullying among adolescents. Bullying is an issue all schools have had to deal with over the years. In the past, bullying has taken on the form of schoolyard name calling, shoving, and fighting. Today, bullying has left the schoolyard and has entered the classrooms, hallways, students' homes, and their media devices. This new form of bullying is called cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Characterizations of adolescents' social relationships on the Internet and investigation of continuity between face-to-face and online social behaviors lend themselves to identification as key components in redefining theories on adolescent social development. It is during the adolescent period that peer interactions arguably hold the greatest importance for individuals' social and behavioral functioning (Berscheid, 2003; Collins, 1997; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). The quantity of peer interactions and the intimacy in friendships rise dramatically (Berndt, 1999; Furman & Buhrmester,

1992). The correlation between the quality of friendship based on face-to-face interaction and that derived from social media sites peak during adolescence (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

The damage caused by words of a peer can stay with a person for a lifetime (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Using the Internet, cyberbullies can transmit their harmful words and deeds any time, and any place they have access to a media device. Although bullying has been around for years, it has changed. Adults and teachers dismissed it as a stage of adolescent development that every child has to go through, similar to a “rite of passage” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007).

McDonnell (2009) argues that one of the most overwhelming negative feelings a young person can have is that of being on the outside, not being accepted, loved, or respected by others. Such factors had a major effect on the way a young person views school, learning, and life. As this researcher noted in the findings from the participants’ responses, such implications became increasingly evident with adolescent exposure to social media networks.

The purpose of the study was to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites. Cyberbullying has become a pervasive type of bullying. It is relentless in its attack on teens. Prior studies choose to focus on a certain ethnic group and their behaviors as bullied victims and cyberbullies, this study did not focus on gender, social class, or ethnicity. Cyberbullying exists among all groups of adolescents. Bullies attack out of a need to satisfy an innate desire to be in control over someone else’s life. As evidenced in the research conducted and a review of

the literature a conscious effort must be made to educate bullies with regard to the harm they cause their victims.

While a review of the literature revealed cyberbullying is an emerging new topic to researchers, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), looked for differences between bullying and cyberbullying. They posit that cyberbullying and traditional bullying are alike in many ways. Both have a bully, a victim, and third parties involved. Secondly, in both cases, their intent is to inflict harm on someone else. There is an imbalance of power between the victim and the bully/cyberbully. As the researchers state, the act of a bully or a cyberbully is not a one-time event. It is repeated over time, with the victim unable to defend himself/herself from the attack.

A qualitative study was conducted on middle school adolescents using interviews. A QualRA is to describe, explain, and understand the complex nature of a phenomenon. The focus of a QualRA is to provide valuable information and insight into a topic. The researcher conducted the study in a middle school located in a medium sized school district in the Lower Hudson Valley Region of Westchester County, New York. Five participants were selected to act as a focus group in order to test the validity of the interview questions.

Interviews were conducted with 10 students randomly selected from a list of students previously identified by the school as having bullied or cyberbullied a peer. An independent consultant conducted the individual interviews. This approach to research is defined as ethnographic as it involved fieldwork or interviews to uncover truths about proposed theories (Willis, 2007). The research is a phenomenological approach to

research as it described the lived experiences of the participants in an attempt to uncover their evolution as cyberbullies through the misuse of social media sites (Maxwell, 2005).

The research questions used to guide this study were:

RQ1: Why do adolescents use social media devices to cyberbully?

RQ2: How do cyberbullies describe their experiences as a bully?

RQ3: What are the expected outcomes of using social media to bully?

The researcher used two approaches of qualitative data analysis to code the data taken from the interviews, (a) thematic analysis, and (b) grounded theory. Thematic analysis requires that the researcher take an in depth analysis of each interview and become familiar with the interviewees intention of their spoken words. The content of the interviews revealed that adolescent cyberbullies have very little regard for their victims by becoming disinhibited to their behavior on social media sites. Several of the participants expressed that cyberbullying made them feel important and in control of others' feelings and emotional states of mind. This discovery could not have occurred unless the researcher coded the each interview line-by-line. This approach to data analysis is known as grounded theory.

Each interview was considered as a single incident. Common themes were identified from the interviews and field notes taken by the interviewer. The process of data analysis involved "making sense out of the text and data...and preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). The researcher searched for patterns, and reoccurring themes in the data through analysis of the interviews, field notes, coding of the data, and

further analysis as new themes and patterns emerged. The goal was to describe cyberbullying through the participants' subjective lived experiences and views.

The implications of the findings of this study divulged that adolescent cyberbullies have an innate desire to dominate their peers for their own personal gratification. As they use their cell phone, computer, laptop, Facebook page, Twitter, gaming device, or AIM, they are literally oblivious to their actions. They have become aware of the pain their words inflict on their victims; however, they have become desensitized to their peer's feelings.

As recent legislation emerges like the Dignity for All Students Act, adolescent victims and their parents have become empowered to act against their assailants. Recent news journals have head lined articles where bystanders have seen something and said something to corroborate victims' allegations of cyberbullying.

The foundational work of this study provided research participants an opportunity to begin a reflective process. Their willingness to be participants in the interviews may cause them to be cognizant of their words, and actions towards their victims. This metanoia, or change of heart, can empower them to begin to partake in peer mediation/conflict resolution sessions. The potential for the use of self-reflection as a tool will afford them the opportunity, in the future, to take on roles as co mediators with teachers of their school. Given the emergence of cyberbullying as a critical issue for adolescent development and growth, continued research on students' perceptions of their behavior is both timely and relevant for educators, parents, and policy-makers.

## References

- Aftab, P. (2009). Stop cyberbullying: What methods work with the different kinds of cyberbullies? Retrieved December 28, 2011, from <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/parents/howdoyouhandleacyberbully.html>.
- Agatston, P. W., Kowalski, R., & Limber, S. (2007). Students' perspectives on cyber bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, 59-60.
- Agatston, P. W., Kowalski, R., & Limber, S. (2008). *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the digital age*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Bargh, J. A., & McKenna, K. Y. A. (2004). The Internet and social life. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*, 573-590.
- Berkowitz, Marvin W., and Oser, Fritz, (1985). *Moral education: Theory and application*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Berndt, T. J. (1999). Friends' influence on students' adjustment to school. *Educational Psychologist, 34*, 15-28.
- Berscheid, E. (2003). The human's greatest strength: Other humans. In L. G. Aspinwall & U. M. Staudinger (Eds.), *A psychology of human strengths: Fundamental questions and future directions for a positive psychology* (pp. 37-47). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bloomer, L. & Volpe, M. (2008). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Braun V., & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.
- Buhrmester, D. (1990). Intimacy of friendship, interpersonal competence, and adjustment in preadolescence and adolescence. *Child Development, 61*, 1101-1111.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Collins, W. A. (1997). Relationships and development during adolescence: Interpersonal adaptation to individual change. *Personal Relationships, 4*, 1-14.

- Cottrell, R. R. & McKenzie, J. F. (2011). *Health promotion and education research methods: Using the five-chapter thesis/dissertation model*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cyberbullying Research Center (2010). *Cyberbullying victimization*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cyberbullying.us/research/.php>.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *The sage handbook for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The sage handbook for qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dishion, T. J., & Owen, L. D. (2002). A longitudinal analysis of friendships and substance use: Bidirectional influence from adolescence to adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 480–491.
- Finn, J. (2004). A survey of online harassment at a university campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19, 468 – 483.
- Furman, W. (1996). The measurement of friendship perceptions: Conceptual and methodological issues. In W. M. Bukowski, A. F. Newcomb, & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *The company they keep: Friendship in childhood and adolescence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gifford-Smith, M. E., & Brownell, C. A. (2003). Childhood peer relationships: Social acceptance, friendships, and peer networks. *Journal of School Psychology*, 41, 235–284.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine Publications.
- Guest, G., & MacQueen, K., & Namey, E. (2012). *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Harris, J. R. (1995). Where is the child's environment? A group socialization theory of development. *Psychological Review*, 102, 458–489.
- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2007). Offline consequences of online victimization: School violence and delinquency. *Journal of School Violence*, 6, 89-112.

- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2009). *Bullying beyond the schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Crown Press.
- Johnson Burke, R. Onwuegbuzie A. J., & Turner, L. A. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 1*, 112  
Doi: 10.1177/1558689806298224.
- Joinson, A. (1998). Causes and implications of behavior on the Internet. In Gackenbach, J. (Ed): *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal Implications* (pp. 43-60). San Diego, CA US: Academic Press.
- Li, Q. (2006). Cyberbullying in schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International, 27*, 157-170.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1998). *The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mason, K. (2008). Cyberbullying: A preliminary assessment for school personnel. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*, 323-348.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach. Second edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Merriam–Webster (2012). *Merriam–Webster Collegiate Dictionary 11<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Retrieved from, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.
- McQuade, C. S., Colt, P. J., Meyer, B. N. (2009). *Cyber bullying. Protecting kid and adults from online bullies*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- McDonnell, S. (July 2009). The art of caring confrontation. *Educational Leadership Journal, Revisiting Social Responsibility, 66*.
- New York State Education Department (2012). *Accountability & Overview Report 2010-2011*. Retrieved from, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools>.
- New York State Education Department (2012). *Dignity for All Students Act 2012*. Retrieved from, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact>.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school. What we know and what we can do?* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rainie, L. (June 2008). Online child safety and literacy, *Pew Internet Research Center* Retrieved from, <http://www.pewInternet.org/topics/Safety.aspx?start=21&x=x#ListContinue>.
- Ringrose, J. (2006). A new universal mean girl: Examining the discursive construction and social regulation of a new feminine pathology. *Feminism Psychology, 16*(4), 405-424. doi: 10.1177/0959353506068747.

- Rothstein, R. & Jacobsen, R. (May 2009). Measuring Social Responsibility. *Educational Leadership Journal, Teaching Social Responsibility*, 66, (8), 14-19.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7, 321-326.
- Tyler, T. R. (2002). Is the Internet changing social life? It seems the more things change, the more they stay the same. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58,195–205.
- Willard, N. (2007). *Cyberbullying and cyber-threats: Responding to the challenge of online social aggression, threats, and distress*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Williams, A. L., and Merten, M. J. (Summer 2008). *A Review of Online Social Networking Profiles by Adolescents: Implications for Future Research and Intervention*, 43, (170).
- Willis, J. W. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretative and critical approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2004). Online aggressor/targets, aggressors, and targets: A comparison of associated youth characteristics. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 45. 1308-1316.

## Appendix A

### Vignettes

**But we call each other that all the time.** During eighth period on Friday, February 3, 2012, I was asked to bring my class down to a special presentation on Cyber bullying. Our guest speakers were Senator Klein and Miss New York. They discussed new legislation that they hoped young people all over Westchester County would help them write concerning Cyber bullying. Senator Klein asked our students questions regarding their interpretation of the definition of Cyber bullying. One of my students stood up and said; “Well, is it really cyber bullying when my friend and I go on our Facebook pages and greet each other like, “What’s up slime.” Now the term “slime” is a derogatory statement referring to a young female adolescent as a whore, tramp or slut. She continued her statement by saying; “We were not hurting each other – we talk like that all the time. We were just playing around with each other.” Miss New York State responded to her question and told her that even though her friend knew she was just playing around with her it now enabled someone else to think that it is acceptable to make negative comments about her on Facebook or other social media network page. My student’s response to Miss New York was a shrug of her shoulders and a muttered, “Oh.” (M. G. Circello, researcher reflective notes, February 2012)

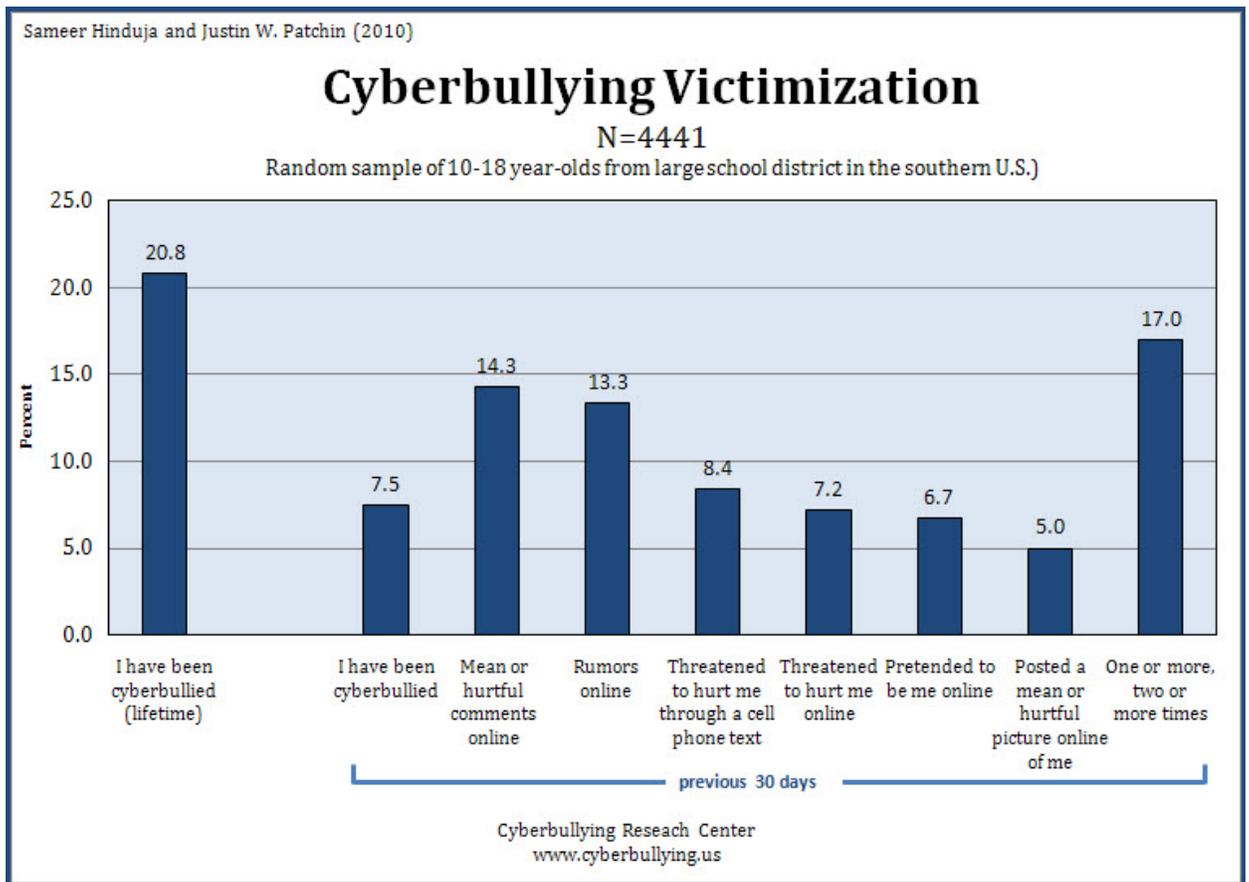
**Oh my God! It was her best friend!** On July 17, 2011, the ABC Family Channel aired a special program about digital abuse and bullying. The TV movie was called Cyberbully. It is about a teenage girl who becomes a victim to online bullying. The

ramifications to her family are costly. The main character, Taylor, is a pretty, 17-year-old high school student but a little awkward, and painfully aware of it. When her mom gives her a computer for her birthday, Taylor is excited by the prospect of freedom of going online without her mother always looking over her shoulder. However, Taylor soon finds herself the victim of betrayal and bullying while visiting a social website. She befriends a young man on a social media site for teens and begins confiding in him revealing personal information about herself. Shockingly, she discovers that her secrets are revealed at school and she becomes afraid to face her peers at school, including her best friend. She is pushed to a breaking point and attempts suicide. It is only after this life-changing event that Taylor learns that she is not alone – meeting other teens, including a classmate, who has had similar experiences. Taylor’s mom is angered from the incident and takes on the school system and state legislation to help prevent others from going through the same ordeal as her daughter. Her mother, in coming up short in gaining recognition regarding the incidents surrounding her daughter’s attempt at suicide, finds a new journalist that agrees to take on her cause to raise awareness of the effects cyber bullying has on its victims. Throughout this entire time of her daughter being in rehab, the identity of the cyberbully is revealed. Out of guilt of being the cause of her friend’s attempt at suicide, it was revealed that the bully her best friend. She had become angry at Taylor for making a comment about the fact the she, the best friend, was no longer a virgin. The news journalist interviews the best friend and asks her why she did what she did to Taylor. Her response was: “It was easy. I did not really think I was doing anything to her because I was not in front of her. I was on the computer and no

one could see me.” Note to self - Disinhibition Theory was proven by this movie. (M. G. Circello, researcher reflective notes, July 2011)

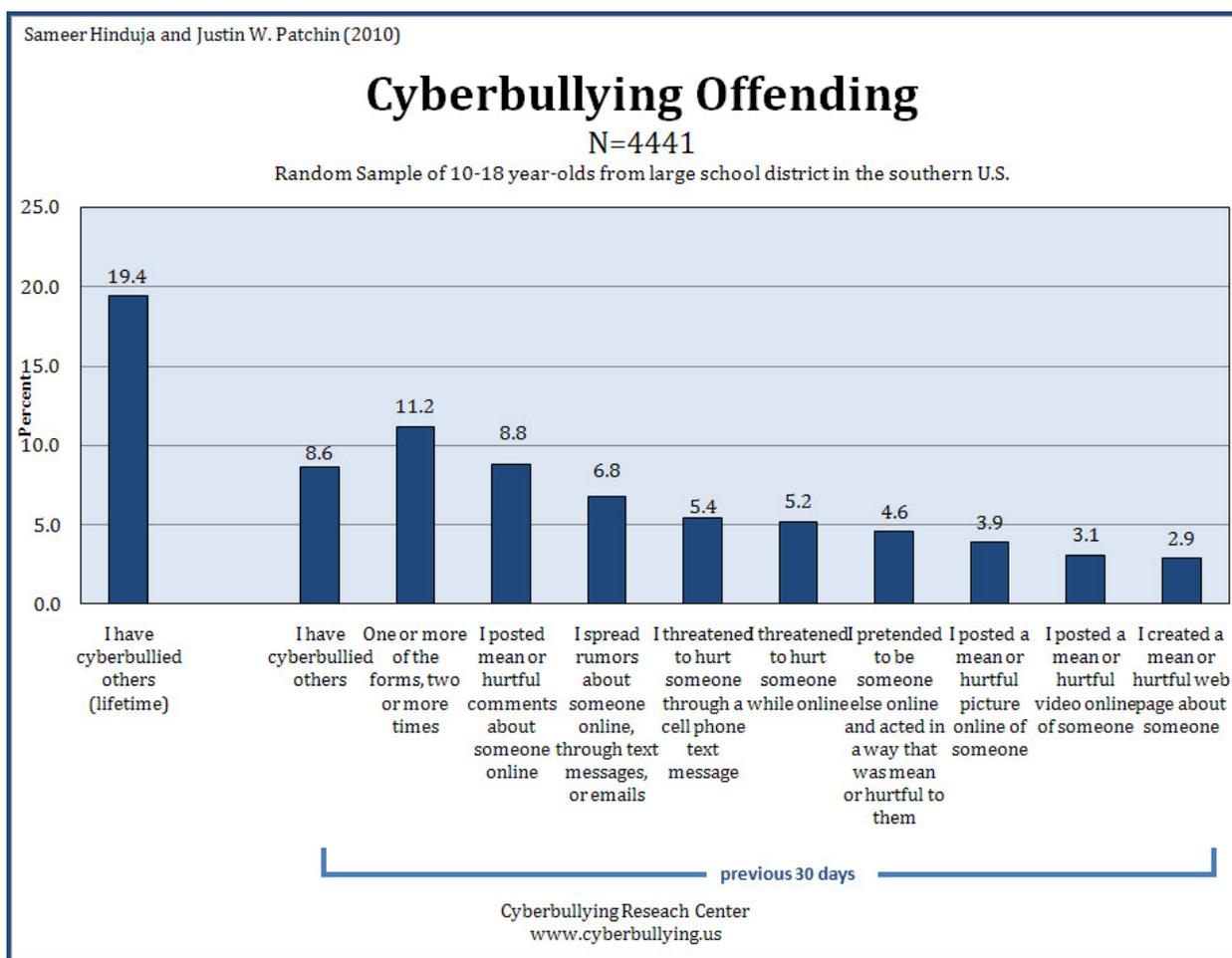
## Appendix B

### Cyberbullying Victimization Survey Results



## Appendix C

### Cyberbullying Offending Survey Results



## Appendix D

**St. John Fisher College**  
Institutional Review Board  
Informed Consent Form  
(for use with minors)

Title of study: Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies.

Name(s) of researcher(s): Marguerita Geralyn Circello

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Richard Maurer Phone for further information:

1.914.271.3992

Purpose of study: The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the reasoning behind the evolution of cyberbullies thru the misuse of social media sites. This study will answer the research questions concerning the reasons why middle school adolescents turn to social media sites bully their peers.

Study Procedures:

- Five participants chosen will act as a focus group testing the validity of the interview questions.
- Ten participants will be asked to participate in individual interview session conducted by an independent consultant as part of the phenomenological approach to the study.
- The interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder.
- There will not be any punitive repercussions as a result of their participation, answers to questions or decision to end interview at any time.
- Participants will be given option to select the location for their individual interview. The interviews will be conducted afterschool and audiotaped.
- School Guidance Counselors, Psychologists and Social Workers have agreed to be available should any student feel any negative emotions talking about their past history with bullying.

- Audiotaped interviews and corresponding notes will be locked in a filing cabinet throughout the interview process and destroyed after three years.
- Parents of the participants will be given the option to attend and remain within view of their child outside the interview room in the event the child has a concern, question or refuses to answer any interview questions.
- In the event the parent cannot attend, an adult will be placed outside the door if the participant is uncomfortable.
- Participants may stop the interview at any time without penalty. (Please see attached Appendices A, B, C, and D)

Approval of study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of study: A Middle School, Northeast Region of U. S Length of participation: 1Hour

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

Risks:

- The study may cause a participant to experience negative emotions talking about their past history with bullying. Should this experience arise, a plan is in place where the participant can stop the interview and seek out one of the counselors or their parent.

Benefits:

- Insights generated from this study will inform and assist educational professionals, law enforcement officers, and national policy makers to use these lived experiences of our students' and identify interventions, and contributions to new knowledge to deter cyberbullying.

Method of compensation, if any: Participants of the study will receive a \$20.00 gift card

to Best Buy to purchase an item of their choice.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:

- This researcher will protect the confidentiality, identity, and privacy of participants, parents, staff, school, and community with the use of pseudonyms throughout the research study.
- Audiotaped interviews and corresponding notes will be locked in a filing cabinet throughout the interview process and destroyed after three years.

Your rights:

As the parent/guardian of a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to allow your minor child to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you or your minor child.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I, the parent or guardian of, a minor \_\_\_\_\_ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above-named study. I also give consent to have my child audio-taped during the focus group or interview. I have received a copy of this form.

_____	_____	_____
Print name (Parent/Guardian)	Signature	Date
Marguerita Geralyn Circello	_____	_____
Print name (Investigator)	Signature	Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above.

## **Appendix E**

### Superintendent Consent Letter

Dear Superintendent:

I am currently a doctoral student in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle. My Chair is Dr. Richard Maurer. I am working toward completing my dissertation research by conducting a research study to describe how the negative misuse of social media sites evolves adolescent cyberbullies. I want to learn how misusing the Internet for aggressive behavior, as cyberbullying, affects the cyberbully's level of consciousness with regard to their actions, outlook on their victims, and the consequences those actions lead to for both the bully and the victim.

To conduct this study, I am requesting permission and endorsement to select one of your middle schools as a data collection site. Data collection will occur during a four-week period and will consist of a focus group of five students, and interviewing ten students who volunteer with parental permission to participate in this study. All sessions are confidential and information will not be shared with anyone other than the transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Attached is a brief description of my research proposal.

I will call your office within a week to request an appointment with you so that we can discuss in detail the selected middle school, the data collection process and procedures. Please contact me at (914) 665-5132 if you have questions prior to scheduling the appointment. You may also call Dr. Richard Maurer of The College of New Rochelle listed below if you have additional questions. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Marguerita G. Circello, Educator  
Prospective Doctoral Candidate

Richard Maurer, Ph.D.  
St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle,  
Ed.D Executive Leadership Program  
New Rochelle, New York 10805  
(914) 271-3991

## Appendix F

### Parental Consent Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently a doctoral student in Executive Leadership at St John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle. I am working toward completing my dissertation by conducting a research study to further explore how the negative misuse of social media promotes the evolution of adolescent cyberbullies. I want to understand how misusing the Internet affects the cyberbully's level of consciousness and the consequences their actions have on both themselves and their victims. This letter is a request for permission to allow your child to participate in this study. Their opinions and feelings are important to me and I would like to have your permission to interview them in this research study. I anticipate the interview will take approximately 60 minutes after school. The interview will be tape-recorded. All sessions are confidential and information will not be shared with anyone other than the transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. No information will identify you, your child, or the school. Interview information will be destroyed after 3 years.

The interview will occur during a time and location within the school as agreed upon by you and your child. If you choose the school site, you may accompany your child to the interview. Arrangements will be made for you to sit outside the room where your child will be interviewed. If you choose not to attend, another adult will be posted outside the interview room. Your child has permission to leave the room at any time to they may feel uncomfortable and seek out School Guidance Counselors, Social Workers, and Psychologists that will be available to them. Your child's participation is voluntary. At anytime during the interview your child may stop the interview or not answer questions without a penalty.

Although participation in this study is strictly voluntary, I am offering all participants the opportunity to receive a \$25 dollar gift certificate to Best Buy to purchase an item of their choice.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, please sign below on the parent signature line and return this letter to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (914) 665-5132. You may also call Dr. Maurer, Doctoral Chair of The College of New Rochelle listed below if you have additional concerns or questions on the rights of participants. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Marguerita GERALYN Circello,  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mt. Vernon, New York 10552

Richard Maurer, Ph.D.  
St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle  
Ed.D Executive Leadership Program  
New Rochelle, New York 10805

I agree to have my child participate in this doctoral research study and to be audiotaped during the interview process.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Legal Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G

### Student Consent Letter

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral student attending St. John Fisher College at The College New Rochelle. Part of the requirement to graduate is to conduct a major research project and I selected the topic "The Influences of the Misuse of Social Media on the Evolution of Adolescent Cyberbullies." You are among the students I would like to interview. I want to learn how access to Texting, Facebook, and Instant Messaging has made it easier for teens to engage in the negative behavior of cyberbullying. Your feelings and opinion is very important to me and I would really appreciate it if you would agree to participate in my research study.

You will be interviewed at your school. If you choose the school site, your parent may come with you to the interview. Although your parent will not be able to hear our conversation, they have the choice to be near and available should you need them. In the event your parent cannot attend, School Guidance Counselors, Social Workers, and Psychologists will be available if you feel uncomfortable, want to leave, or ask a question. Please know that your participation is voluntary and you may stop the interview at anytime without a penalty.

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes after school. A tape recorder will be used to record our discussion. All your responses during the interview session are confidential and will not be shared with anyone other than the transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. You, your parent and school will not be mentioned in the study.

Please discuss this with your parent. If you decide to participate, please sign your name on the line below for your signature. A stamped return envelope is provided for you to send back to my office no later than \_\_\_\_\_.

To thank you for your assistance in volunteering to participate in this research study, you will be given a \$20.00 gift certificate to Best Buy to purchase an item of your choice.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (914) 665-5132. You may also call Dr. Maurer, Doctoral Chair of The College of New Rochelle listed below if you have additional concerns or questions on the rights of participants. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Marguerita GERALYN Circello, Educator  
Doctoral Candidate

Richard Maurer, Ph.D.  
St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle,  
Ed.D Executive Leadership Program  
New Rochelle, New York 10805

I agree to participate in this research study and have my interview tape-recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix H**

### **Principal's Consent Letter**

Dear Principal:

I am currently a doctoral student in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle. I am working toward completing my dissertation research by conducting a research study to describe how the negative misuse of social media sites evolves adolescent cyberbullies. I want to learn how misusing the Internet for aggressive behavior, as cyberbullying, affects the cyberbully's level of consciousness with regard to their actions, outlook on their victims, and the consequences those actions lead to for both the bully and the victim.

To conduct this study, I am requesting permission and endorsement to conduct my research your middle school. Data collection will occur during a four-week period and will consist of interviewing 15 middle school students who volunteer with parental permission to participate in this study. Five students will be asked to partake in a focus group interview process to test the validity of the interview questions. The ten remaining students will be individually interviewed. All sessions are confidential and information will not be shared with anyone other than the transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. Attached is a brief description of my research proposal.

I will call your office within a week to request an appointment with you so that we can discuss in detail the data collection process and procedures. Please contact me at (914) 494-0210 or [mcircello@mtvernoncsd.org](mailto:mcircello@mtvernoncsd.org) if you have questions regarding my research and data collection. You may also call Dr. Richard Maurer of The College of New Rochelle listed below if you have additional questions. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Marguerita G. Circello, Educator  
Doctoral Candidate

Richard Maurer, Ph.D.

St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle,  
Ed.D Executive Leadership Program  
New Rochelle, New York 10805  
(914) 271-3991

I grant permission and endorse the doctoral research study at my middle school.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

